

I brush that off. Of course he'd say that. Perhaps he's the divide-and-conquer sort.

"Just so you know, she's using me too," he says.

Have I misread him? Or is this the shoot-one-of-your-own-to-show-loyalty trick? But his face is open. "She needs you to find that pool," he says. "That's it, that's all. She's obsessed with finding someone to show her what she imagines she needs."

"She's found the perfect guide," I say, meaning him.

He's shaking his head. "She doesn't follow maps, just stories."

He wants her. I try to keep that straight in my head, think about something other than his words, remind myself that zinc is kitty-corner to aluminum on the Periodic Table. But then so is carbon. I want to tell him to go packing. This gives me an image of suitcases, which reminds me of smithsonite, a mineral with a crystalline crust made from carbon and zinc.

"She thinks she needs to find this . . . *mirror* . . . to know her direction," he says. "It's a mirror: she hides from the responsibility to choose, pushing it behind her, like the curls she tries to hide behind her ears."

■ I'm assigned the rarely patrolled Mist Creek Trail.

"Your eyes." says the Ant, tapping his temple. "Keep them open. It's a long one. There'll be animals, so make lots of noise. There's a radio repeater to the north, so if you break a leg make sure it's in a north-facing clearing. Don't get bogged down clearing trees. I'd rather you get up to the pass and make a complete work list. Check the trail log and pack a replacement sign."

The Lion mimics an enthusiastic child. "Hey, boss, can I just take notes while I work too?"

The Ant swivels and looks steadily at the Lion. The Lion starts to smile defensively.

"You're prepping the honey barrels for servicing at the campgrounds."

The Lion groans. “Don’t forget your nail polish,” he tells me.

I check the log. There’s only one entry in the last two years: “Trail indistinct.”

I have the map open on the seat as I drive south. Given the situation between the Ranger and the Interpreter, the map seems refreshingly clear. I find the overgrown pullout. It’s over the highest part of the park, the Highwood Pass, and the mists come down the valley as they do in the rain shadow of the Great Divide. The trees are thick fir, heavily overgrown. My pulaski clangs loudly as I pull it from the truck box. I start up a narrow trail of mossy corduroy, over torrents of cold, clear water.

I’m soaked by the time I’ve hiked the valley and come down from the pass. On the descent I see the long valley haunted with mist. It seems far. There’s been plenty of spoor: large elk, mountain goat, and bighorn, and predators, like bear—the scat heavy in fur and small bones—but the emptiness chills the dew on my neck. The pass is a crossroads for late-season horse tours; I find the trail sign lower down in a grove of alder. The spot of the intersection has been thumbed so much that the paint has worn off, revealing a shiny absence. These days, the blank spots on the map are the places we stand, not those where we want to go. I wonder at the need to touch.

I pull the old sign, leaving a naked post. On popular trails, I’ve seen people standing bewildered, looking at each other, at the empty post, waiting for a sign to appear. In other places, the trailhead kiosks are covered in graffiti, as if the hikers, fearing their own transitory existence, are compelled to add themselves to the record in whatever fashion they can.

I replace the sign, which has a rivet drilled into the *You Are Here* spot. I pull out my tiny bottle of hot-pink polish a little self-consciously and paint the rivet. Nail polish is the only paint we’ve found is durable against the constant poking.

I strap on the old sign and thrash through the springy alder. Hours of pushing heavy branches and splashing dew has me cold and hungry and preoccupied with squelching boots. I

stumble beside a meadow. A statuesque elk stands watching.

It's a buck with his five-point rack half-grown and his aquiline muzzle matted with dirt. I shuffle to find footing in the slippery bank, heart thumping in surprise and concern that he might contest his space. He's absolutely still. To the far side of the meadow, something bursts forth like an explosion of partridge, but it's low and sleek and brown-grey.

The elk bolts. My heels slip out. I sit down hard in the thicket. My axe digs its handle in but the head spears up, the old sign flips onto the grass before me in a bright square, the cold earth bleeds through my pants. My skin draws as I realize it's a wolf.

I'm almost holding my breath while the pluming nose of the elk bobs and the snout of the wolf hisses sharp blasts of mist. The canine is almost abreast the rippling flanks even as the elk builds its velocity. A feral stench of rot chokes the fresh mint of the leaves and the heady musk of the soil. It pulls me down, a low chant of death, of overwhelming will and hunger.

My mind urges the elk to accelerate and pull free from the popping jaw of the wolf. Yet in the same instant I feel the exhilaration of the chase. My fingernails claw the loam, my small human legs tremble, my heart tightens with fear and with a wild need to catch that which is pursued.

Their breath merges until the elk's exhalation is the inhalation of the wolf, becoming the only sound. In the rushing blur I can't tell them apart. For an instant there's no past and no future and it's not a question of which will prevail but simply a distribution of air that will either coalesce or draw apart. Then, in a smashing of branches, the elk springs away into the forest. The wolf pants, flattened ears, spiked fur.

The sign at my feet makes no sense. There is no wolf, or elk, or man on it, only a meaningless scribble. It shows the valley as I might use it, but that's not what's really here. I suddenly realize: if I follow the maps, that's all I'll ever find.

It's difficult to draw myself away, to remember what is me and

what is not. I freeze, noticing the hackles of the wolf passing in the far bog bean. He ducks his head, lolling his tongue on a severe range of ivory peaks. Alone, minutes later, I rise, limbs heavy with coppery adrenalin.

I wonder why the wolf would try that alone. Maybe others are around, or he has used me as a distraction. Just down the trail the elk appears again in a glade. It turns, perhaps associating me with the wolf, its eyes directionless as black marbles. I realize his life is a constant reaction to being hunted. Would he be at peace if he couldn't smell wolf?

With a ponderous weave he vanishes into the forest. I try to imagine what it would be like to be always on the run, but now I can't separate the elk from the forest.

■ I meet the Ranger at the railway crossing. His nose is smeared white with zinc oxide against the sun. It's hot, and the schist gravel under the ties smells like iron, the ties creating an oily haze above the rails. A flash from my childhood: running to put pennies on the track before the train comes.

Not everyone sees the train tracks the way the Interpreter or I do.

"Two streaks of rust and a right-of-way," spits the Ranger, kicking the cinders at the crossing.

I slam the door of my truck. They're all the same, the parks trucks. They smell like vinyl dashboards, and the seat fabric is rough with back-road dust. Most of the chromium is chipped off. But like uniforms, they're each different in small ways. Being new, I get the one that is slow to start and accelerate. Twenty metres down the rails is a pile of grain, dumped in a squat cone.

"Black bears reported," says the Ranger. "You'll have to clean that up." The Ranger is all business, emotionally constrained by the uniform.

"I've already got my orders," I say. I heard it on the radio. The